

# UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

## Lili Fabilli and Eric Hoffer Essay Prize

### 2016-17 Topic: Advice to the new Chancellor

Winners: Maura Nolan, Evan Bauer, Luis Edward Tenorio, Noah Whiteman, Kristina Chan, Ariana Lightner, Brit Moller, Irina Popescu, Michele Rabkin, Bryan Jones, William McGregor, and Carter Keeling

#### Maura Nolan

On November 4, 2008, at 8:00 PM Pacific Time, the Presidential election was officially called for Barack Obama. Berkeley students gathered on campus to celebrate the election of our first African-American president. But there was no central place or person to provide a point of focus for their energy. No one knew what to do or where to go. Then, as if drawn by instinct, the students began walking to the Chancellor's house. When they arrived, they knocked on the door. Chancellor Birgeneau came out to greet them. Later, he described the occasion in simple terms: "They wanted a speech about the election. So I gave a speech." The students cheered and gradually dispersed. These students came to the Chancellor's house with an inchoate sense of need: they wanted the Berkeley community to acknowledge the significance of this historic event. They needed the person on campus who most embodies Berkeley's identity and values. They needed the Chancellor. More than that: they needed the Chancellor right away, in person, on campus, at the door of his campus home.

The word "chancellor" comes from the Latin *cancellarius*, which means "doorkeeper." The job of doorkeeper at a university is not an abstract job; it is not a job done on paper or from a distance. My first piece of advice for the new Chancellor is thus: **Be present and be visible** to the Berkeley community. Open your door. Walk around the campus regularly; eat lunch where students eat and talk

to them. Invite faculty to your home. Visit a class on a subject you know nothing about. Watch the women's soccer team practice. Visit Styles Hall. You will be very busy being the Chancellor; don't let your busyness alienate you from your community.

"Chancellor," or *cancellarius*, has a second meaning: "living or kept behind bars." The Chancellor has many constituents with many demands and priorities. Often these demands and priorities conflict. They can seem like a set of prison bars, locking the Chancellor in a small space with little room to maneuver. My second piece of advice, then, is that **Small actions are better than no action**. It is better for your constituents to see that you are actively leading the campus, rather than reacting to circumstances. It is also better for you. You will feel less overwhelmed by institutional inertia, less likely to be defeated by the scope of Berkeley's demands, if you build a portfolio of small victories from week to week.

Last of all, I would advise you to remember you are a *cancellarius*, a doorkeeper. "Keeper" comes from the Old English *cēpan*, which means both "to observe and notice" and "to care about, to look out for." **Get to know Berkeley by observing and noticing how the campus works.** That's what keepers do. Goalkeepers know every quirky habit of opposing teams' players. Keepers of sheep know immediately when one is lost. They know what they know from direct personal observation—from keeping. Please keep Berkeley well.

## Evan Bauer

Dear New Chancellor,

I will not to pretend to be adequately knowledgeable of fiscal matters to give you advice on how to manage public funds. Nor will I pretend to be well-versed enough in behind-the-scenes bureaucratic power dynamics to give you advice on how to efficiently implement new policies. And I will certainly not pretend to be sufficiently informed about a public university's relationship to state and federal governments to give you advice on how to navigate that territory. As such, there remains only one piece of advice I feel comfortable giving: have something absurdly quirky about your appearance, like maybe a pair of glasses that are so objectively hideous that there's no question as to whether or not you are wearing them ironically or not, such that everyone feels in on the joke. Or maybe you become the first UC chancellor to consistently carry around a wizard staff carved from a bristlecone pine root. I'm just spitballing here—your special something will be up to you.

Now before you throw this essay in the shredder, hear me out. I've written before on the utility of humor when addressing difficult subject matter in writing. Writers like Miriam Toews will use humor as a gateway into approaching subject matter perhaps otherwise too suffocatingly tragic to address head on. The humor seeks to transform the crushing weight of existence into something generative, something that makes us laugh, makes our lives a bit brighter and a bit more livable. I believe the same principle applies to real life. And I will not sugar coat it for you: you are assuming an immensely stressful position during a particularly difficult time, so you've certainly got some transforming to do.

For you are assuming a position of leadership at the head of a student body composed of perhaps some of the most brilliant, massively stressed out overachievers in our Local

Supercluster. And not to mention why I used the phrase “particularly difficult” a moment ago—in this recent post-election landscape, many of your students fear for their safety. Your LGBTQ students—including myself—now have a vice president who supports conversion therapy; your female students now have a president who campaigned on a rhetoric that condones sexual assault; your racialized students are witnessing a nationwide spike in hate crimes; and of particular precarity are your undocumented students, towards whom your actions in the coming months and years will be crucial.

And so, New Chancellor, we need to laugh. We do not want to be led by a tailored suit atop an ivory tower set behind a \$700,000 fence. We want a chancellor wearing a pair of neon orange go-go boots she found on the bargain rack at Goodwill who will sit with us on the steps of Sproul Hall and, at the end of her speech, crack a tasteful joke and follow it up with an exaggerated platonic wink just to remind us that someone cares enough about us to see us smile.

## Noah Whiteman

eucalyptol wind  
hits my face, I remember  
why you will love it  
panoramic hill  
ivory campus below  
tonic for the soul  
the golden bear pool  
has a view of the city  
afternoon sunshine  
free speech movement café  
sit under the *Arbutus*  
hummingbirds hover  
chez panisse café  
with an *Araucaria*  
sit facing the west  
number eleven  
an auspicious sign  
the next chancellor is  
red-tailed hawks nest here  
and they call after the rains  
when their babies fledge  
the chochenyo tribe  
lived in the berkeley hills  
this land was their land  
global campus dies  
meanwhile, our facades crumble  
let home fires burn  
nobels carry weight  
is dynamite really that great?  
gandhi went without

a garbage can waits  
flies finish a circle of life  
on my office floor  
ivory towers  
but how long will bells toll?  
please keep them ringing  
heads nod up and down  
as the words slip out of me  
California's dream

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first generation  
we are here, we are many  
do not forsake us  
eighteen seventy-four  
first cal woman graduates  
ashes of civil war  
prescient and bold  
a free speech movement grows old  
but embers still glow  
no secretive doors  
or fences around your house  
or ivy envy  
boughs of redwood droop  
marbled trunks of blue gums flash  
they will outlive us  
faculty senate  
can be like parliament  
with only tories  
endless turnovers  
not of apples, but of staff  
ciao, shared services  
two x chromosomes  
have never been chancellor  
I hope you are her  
ten male chancellors  
hardy-weinberg frequency  
a deviation  
from what well arises  
your moral agency?  
is it deep and clear?  
strawberry creek bursts  
despite a drought of water  
thick with watercress

# Kristina Chan

To: Mr. or Ms. New Chancellor

From: A humbled student

Quite frankly, you have yet to be chosen, and perhaps I am simply writing to a current figment of my imagination. However, in this loose leafed existence of our chancellor lies such beauty because there exists the knowledge that amongst all of the current uncertainty, you are an absolute set in the future.

Nevertheless, welcome. Welcome to the hotseat of one of the finest universities of the world. Welcome to the position that is in such public display that no matter what step you take, it may be put under scrutiny.

This welcome - in light of how it may seem - is the most honorable welcome of them all. Just as the presidency of any country is placed under the same parameters, let me say this:

You are a brave soul and an ambitious individual. An inspiration under fire.

If you are reading this now, what I wrote about you not existing may seem silly. After all, you are a living breathing human. A member of the Homo sapien species of earth. Yet, in this vague humor of your previous non-existence lies one of the greatest pieces of advice I hope I can offer you.

To begin, you first have to realize that there exists some disillusionment as students wonder where the university's leadership stands. Why did all the uncertainty begin in the first place? Well, the university goes beyond a campus for education. It is a collective of voices that must be heard. The concern of one may just as well be the concern of all others. After all, each and every one of us - if placed in their position - may feel the same. As a result, you should make the students' concerns your concerns.

Notice, in my writing I did not dwell on the in-betweens that came between the uncertainty of the chancellor seat and the subsequent fulfillment of it. The students of this campus may never know what work went into making this moment possible, but the real importance is that the moment has come. We have a new chancellor.

My advice to you is to view the plans you will make as a forecast of absolute possibility. Whether or not the audience of this public university agrees with the weather, do what is within your capability to establish the university's own white clouds that will bring good weather about. There may be inescapable attributes and factors such as the sun. However, use it to your advantage. Protect the children of this great university from metaphorical sunburn and drought.

Turn the harmful UV rays into evaporation of water and create the beautiful white clouds that can protect us. There may be steps back or lightning storms that may seem dreary, destructive, disagreeable. After all, that is the weather. But keep optimistic with the bigger picture in mind. Lightning storms? Well...at least, Fiat Lux.

Best Wishes,

A Letter From The Past → Sent to the Future

## **Ariana Lightner – “Students First”**

To our new Chancellor,

I, too, am a new employee. I work in Warren Hall, a building named for the man who said, "Californians, this is the time for us to do our utmost for the University because it has done its utmost for us." My advice would be to honor the undercurrent of that statement. In my short time here to date, I have heard much about the shortfall we are facing as an institution. As a member of your Finance department, I take this very seriously. However, I also believe it is easy to over prioritize such matters, while the promising young lives of those we serve are those most likely to be negatively impacted. I have no doubt that Cal continues to provide world-class education and opportunities despite diminishing means. And while I do appreciate that there is brainstorming in progress, I have concerns over the far-reaching creativity being employed in order to tackle this no-win budget crisis.

I am new to higher education as a public servant and it's been more than 15 years since I received my B.A. from the UC system. Still, I have fond memories from my time as an undergrad, which I truly cherish as a coming of age period and largely formative experience for me. When I hear about undergrads skipping meals due to high costs of tuition and fees, freshman commuting to San Francisco for general education requirements due to campus space restraints, students losing credits earned elsewhere due to denial of transferability and financial aid recipients being stripped of registered classes based on new untested policy, the mother in me cringes. I have to believe that we can be doing more to be supportive of these vulnerable young people as they simultaneously navigate the challenges of newfound independence and adulthood, while also honing some of the finest minds our nation has to offer. And the accountant in me shakes my head knowing that an ailing student body, lawsuits, bad publicity and a rising drop-out rate can also be quite costly.

There will be much distraction as you join following a year of multiple misconduct investigations and administrative office vacancies. We look to you as the incoming leader to nurture and expand efforts to address some of these most human of crises and not lose sight that in providing a solid foundation to the leaders of tomorrow, there is good reason to believe that the University will enjoy dividends from alumni and their successes in the not distant future. I would encourage you to engage with and solicit feedback from your brilliant and outspoken students in person as much as possible and to cultivate and seriously consider the ideas they may propose. I urge you to recall your eighteen-year-old self when weighing the options our capable administration presents.

Thank you for your commitment.

## **Irina Popescu – “Open-Letter to the New Chancellor”**

Our campus is riddled with fears and worries. Our job for the next four years is to remedy this feeling of doubt, to join with our students, and with one another, effecting the change we want to see for our campus community, state and nation.

As a community of scholars in one of the most open-minded and liberal campuses in the nation, I urge you to make sure that the Ethnic, African-American, and Women and Gender departments get the funding they need not only to survive but to prosper. I urge you to invest in the Humanities more, because empathy and non-violent activism can be widely distributed through the work done within

these departments. Our job now, as a campus community, is not to play victim. Now, we must work with our students to plan our futures.

As a woman I want to tell you that I am disappointed and saddened, having finally realized that this country still has a lot of work to do when it comes to respecting women and accepting us as part of the larger force governing the national landscape. I want to urge you to actively address the many cases of sexual harassment our campus continues to experience. I urge you to develop initiatives and policies which help victims of sexual harassment feel protected and safe. Also, for our students' sake, I urge you to promise them that we all will work, as a linked community of activists, to fight for women's reproductive rights and prevent our country and state from moving backwards in time.

As an immigrant, I want to urge you to reach out to the many immigrant and undocumented students on our campus. Let these students know that we will protect them with every fiber of our being.

I urge you to tell us all that 2020 will be different because we will stand up and join together to create a united front grounded on love and the celebration of difference. We will overcome the pile of hate accumulated by this gruesome campaign. I urge you to give us this hope.

I urge you to reach out to the LGBT community, and remind them that we stand together to fight for the human rights necessary for the survival of our campus and nation.

I urge you to reach out to Muslim students and students of color and tell them that we are all appalled by the racist viewpoints expressed during 2016 and that they have no place on our campus.

I urge you to tell students to believe in books and to keep reading because books *do* make a difference by telling stories about individual experiences which history too often overlooks. We need to flood the world with these stories and experiences. Now is the time for standing together to begin reconstructing our nation and to protect Berkeley's foundation of diversity and inclusion.

## **Michele Rabkin – “Take a Hike, Chancellor”**

Chancellor, welcome! I have worked for the university under four of your predecessors; I heard each articulate his vision for the university, and saw the legacy each left behind. I know you arrive with your own goals. As you pursue them, my advice is simple: take a walk.

Chancellor Chang-Lin Tien was remarkably popular with students and staff. The reason? He interacted with them all the time. He was famous for talking with students as he walked across campus—and for seeking them out in the library, dorms, and bleachers, where he yelled “Go Bears!” with abandon. This doesn't mean he neglected more dignified duties—Tien was a tremendously successful leader of the university's first large-scale fundraising campaign. But he was perceived as accessible, and that gave him huge leverage.

When Tien stepped down, it was said that no one could replicate his style. But to understand his success only in terms of personality is to miss an important lesson. There are ways to foster connection even if you're not a natural extrovert. Tien's successor, Chancellor Berdahl, was a much quieter man. I'll never forget, though, how he spoke to the Berkeley Staff Assembly wearing a t-shirt that read “UC Berkeley Staff Member.”

Staff here crave a leader who is aware of their concerns and open to their input. As a member of the Chancellor's Staff Advisory Committee under Chancellor Birgeneau, I saw how he sought out feedback and buy-in from a broad range of campus community members. He held regular breakfast meetings with faculty, and accepted our committee's invitation to do the same with staff—conversations that provided him with valuable on-the-ground insights. From the day he arrived, Birgeneau made clear that equity and inclusion were his top priorities; he was able to make real progress in those areas because he listened to and worked closely with students, faculty, and staff.

What happens when a Chancellor loses touch with the community? I'm sure you've heard about the reaction to the fence that Chancellor Dirks had built around University House, or the "escape door" installed in his office. You may not have heard that, in the interest of efficiency, Dirks rarely met in person with any of his advisory committees. Choices like this had the unfortunate effect of isolating him. He lost the opportunity to hear from the diverse voices that make up our unique campus community; he denied himself the chance to learn from individuals' experiences. As a perception of inaccessibility spread, the initial good will that had greeted his arrival eroded. When difficult situations arose, the Chancellor found he had few allies or defenders.

So: get out of California Hall! Explore every corner of this beautiful campus, and its many remote locations, from the top of Centennial Drive to down on Fourth Street. Get to know the feisty, opinionated, passionate people who make up our student body, faculty, and staff. Listen to our stories. Share your own. Let's take a walk, together.

## **William McGregor – “Welcome to Berkeley”**

Dear Chancellor: Welcome to UC Berkeley. Be grateful that we are limited to 500 words in these essays. Otherwise you would be deluged with reams of advice from the participants in this contest. I will limit my contribution to four suggestions. They may appear to be rather prosaic, but sometime the prosaic precedes the profound. Suggestion One: On December 12, 2016 the Vice chancellor for research sent out an email discussing what his unit had focused on in the fall and how they achieved their goals. The following day I received a second email from him outlining what the research initiatives would be in the spring and what effect they might have on the campus. Even though I don't work in the research unit I thought it was extremely refreshing to receive such a missive. Here was a Vice chancellor reporting to us instead of us reporting to him. How novel. It felt like an acknowledgement that he considers staff, along with faculty and students, bright, engaged, and concerned about the future and focus of the University. I recommend that you also engage with staff as often as you see fit, going beyond telling us who has been elevated to which position. I would go so far as to suggest that you create a schedule for doing this. This will enable staff to hold your feet to the fire.

Suggestion Two: Don't be afraid to step on toes. Although UC Berkeley is the premier public university in the country, it is also a very large bureaucracy. Many things are done simply because that is how they have always been done and staff sometimes feels afraid to recommend or implement changes for fear of offending others. Not every idea or process that has been introduced in the past 20 years has been a good idea. But they are all still here. Be willing to examine how we do business and be emphatic about putting your stamp on things.



Suggestion 3: Don't hit the ground running. It will be a daunting task overseeing this University and I hope you will give yourself three to six months to take everything in. Trust me, the problems we have here will still be problems three to six months from now. In the department I work at we spend a lot of time looking at the big picture. Unfortunately, this often results in the small picture being ignored and the big picture never being completed. It can sometimes be a good idea to think small, since the big picture is often painted by joining several small pictures together. I'll close with this final suggestion: Enjoy yourself during your tenure here. It's an enormous responsibility. But at the same time it is an opportunity to work with so many people who are bright, creative and willing to help. It will be an exciting time for you. I wish you and your loved ones well.